

The Russian *Siloviki* and Political Change

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The Russian elite under Vladimir Putin, according to the conventional wisdom, is dominated by men in uniform. The Russian sociologist Olga Kryshatanovskaya was one of the first experts to make this claim, dubbing Putin's regime a "militocracy" – dominated by people with backgrounds in the secret police, the military, and law enforcement organs (the *siloviki*). Average Russians agree; in polls they have consistently stated that Putin most of all represents the interests of the *siloviki*. A related approach, although partially at odds with the militocracy scheme, contends that Putin's Russia is a "neo-KGB state," maintaining that the KGB evolved from being "a state within the state" in the Soviet Union to "the state itself" under Putin. Thus, in this narrower conception, it is not just any man in uniform, but only *chekists* (from the name of the early Soviet secret police, the *Cheka*) who run Putin's Russia.¹

If Russia is a militocracy or a neo-KGB state, it logically stands to reason that *siloviki* or *chekists* likely will play an equally prominent role in a post-Putin political system. A powerful faction within the elite, with special access to both power (guns) and knowledge (secret intelligence), should be well-positioned to maintain their position. For example, leading Russia expert Kimberly Marten has argued that even if Putin is no longer in charge the system is unlikely to change, even if Putin leaves power, because of the dominance of "KGB/FSB networks," who can use their control over secret information and financial assets to squash any potential rival.²

¹ Olga Kryshatanovskaya, "Rezhim Putina: liberal'naya militokratiya?", *Pro et Contra*, 7, 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 158-180; Olga Kryshatanovskaya and Stephen White, "Putin's Militocracy," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 19, 4 (2003), pp. 289-306; Levada Center, *Obshchestvennoye mneniye: Sbornik*, multiple years; "The making of a neo-KGB state," *The Economist*, August 23, 2007. The name "Cheka" comes from the Russian acronym for Extraordinary Commission, the secret police organization created under Lenin.

² "Will the Putin Regime Crumble? *Foreign Affairs*' Brain Trust Weighs in," *Foreignaffairs.com*, April 17, 2016.

This paper challenges this view of the likely trajectory of future political change in Russia. In particular, I explore what role the *siloviki* might play in fundamental political change in Russia over the next 10-15 years, arguing that their ability to dictate the future direction of Russia is by no means assured.³ To the extent that representatives of the *siloviki* play a role in political change in the medium term, whether of a constitutional or extra-constitutional variety, they are likely to be reactive rather than proactive and divided rather than unified. Marten is correct that *chekists* are likely to support the continuation of the status quo, but neither the *siloviki* in general nor *chekists* in particular are a coherent and unified team. The *siloviki* are internally divided along both organizational (formal) and so-called “clan” (informal) lines. Furthermore, the Russian *siloviki* do not possess the organizational or ideological characteristics that often lead men in uniform to decisive action in other parts of the world.

I draw on both comparative politics research on similar regimes around the world, and examples from Soviet and Russian history, in this attempt to forecast the future role of the *siloviki*. Lessons from other countries suggest that the role of coercive force is often decisive at times of fundamental political change, but only highly cohesive armed groups tend to be successful in gaining and holding power. The Russian *siloviki* do not fit this model. Furthermore, the lessons of Russian history suggest that even when force-wielding structures do play an important role, it is most often at the behest of other political elites, rather than as an autonomous force. Future *siloviki* behavior in so-called “sovereign power issues” – deciding

³ By fundamental political change, I mean a change in the nature of the system itself, not just change of the leader. The 10-15 year time frame is somewhat arbitrary, but it is meant to be a medium-term time horizon, taking us beyond short-term changes over the next couple of years. Thus, for example, in this paper I will not examine in any detail the dramatic changes of 2016 that affected the power ministries and the *siloviki*, such as the creation of the National Guard or the departure from power of key *chekisty* linked to Putin such as Sergey Ivanov, Viktor Ivanov, Yevgeniy Murov, and Andrey Belyaninov.

who rules the state -- will most of all be cautious and conservative.⁴ The *siloviki* are unlikely to be at the forefront of a radical political shift in Russia.

WHO ARE THE SILOVIKI?

Russia's "force structures" (*siloviye struktury*) are the state's military, security, and law enforcement bodies. *Siloviki*, then, are those who work or worked for one of the force structures, or "power ministries." In Soviet times it was simpler, because there were three main agencies – the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), which controlled the police, and the KGB (Committee on State Security). After the Soviet collapse the number of power ministries proliferated as part of a deliberate strategy by Yeltsin to divide state coercive resources, in particular the powerful KGB that in August 1991 played the lead role in organizing the attempted hardliner coup against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Although Putin has partially reversed this fragmentation, giving the FSB restored power in some areas, he did not return Russia to its tripartite structure from the mature Soviet system. Indeed, at times he has furthered this dispersal of power, most recently in 2016 when he created a powerful National Guard of over 200,000 armed personnel under the direct control of his longtime associate and former bodyguard, Viktor Zolotov.⁵

It would be a big mistake, however, to assume that all *siloviki* share common interests and ideas. Indeed, often the interests of these different organizations are more in competition than in harmony. At a general level, this is Bureaucratic Politics 101 – organizations with

⁴ On sovereign power issues, see: Timothy J. Colton, "Perspectives on Civil-Military Relations in the Soviet Union," in Timothy J. Colton and Thane Gustafson, eds., *Soldiers and the Soviet State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 7-11.

⁵ Brian D. Taylor, *State Building in Putin's Russia: Coercion and Policing after Communism* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 36-70; Tat'yana Stanovaya, "Gvardiya prezidenta: kak novoye supervedomstvo menyayet konfiguratsiyu silovikov?" *Politkom.ru*, April 11, 2016.

similar and overlapping missions often compete for power and resources. For example, multiple Russian law enforcement and security agencies – including the FSB, the MVD, and the Investigative Committee – have jurisdiction over economic crimes, an important (and potentially lucrative) realm of activity in Russia’s rough-and-tumble capitalism. Russia’s power ministries also have deep legacies of conflict from the Soviet past, related to issues such as KGB monitoring of the military from the inside, or the privileged status of *chekists* compared to average cops. As Putin once remarked, “Those of us in the Cheka never liked the police,” and he grew angry as a young man when it was suggested to him that his legal education was setting him up for a career as a cop.⁶ Putin could not eliminate these rivalries even if he wanted to, and arguably the presence of competing power ministries strengthens his position and provides him with more reliable information on their activities.

Russian *siloviki*, although generally possessing a conservative worldview, also do not represent an ideological monolith. It is generally believed that *siloviki* tend to be statist and illiberal, favoring a hard line at home and a confrontational foreign policy abroad. As one former KGB general put it, *chekists* “are patriots and proponents of a strong state grounded in centuries-old tradition.... *History recruited them* to carry out a special operation for the resurrection of our Great Power [*Derzhava*]....” This characterization of *chekist* values does reflect many of the views of Putin and other *chekists* from within his inner circle. As two of Russia’s leading authorities on the FSB put it, “If the FSB has an ideology, it is the goal of stability and order.” At the same time, it would be a mistake to presume ideological homogeneity, especially across the different agencies, given the different organizational cultures

⁶ *Ot pervogo litsa: Razgovory s Vladimirom Putinyim* (Vagrius, 2000), pp. 25, 128-129.

of the military, the secret services, and the police. Surveys of the elite, including *siloviki*, demonstrate that power ministry personnel hold a range of political views.⁷

Another reason why the *siloviki* are not a unified force in Russian politics is that they are not defined solely by their organizational background – they also have informal ties to people outside their agency and indeed outside the state, such as private businesspeople. In other words, individual *siloviki* are not just members of a state bureaucracy but also inhabit a set of informal networks that cross administrative barriers and the public-private divide. Informal clans matter as much as formal positions and titles. The importance of clans and informal networks is of course not confined to *siloviki* and power ministry officials – it is true of economic and political elites at both the local and national level. This is part of “how Russia really works.”⁸

This fundamental insight to Russian politics – that informal clans matter as much as formal position – unfortunately often coexists with a simplistic reductionism when it comes to enumerating the important clans. In particular, it is often assumed that there is a single, unified *siloviki* clan encompassing all of the *siloviki* officials with top positions in Russian politics. However, there has never been a unified *siloviki* clan. Instead, there are multiple and competing

⁷ Laurent Murawiec and Clifford C. Gaddy, “The Higher Police: Vladimir Putin and His Predecessors,” *The National Interest*, 67 (Spring 2002), p. 35, emphasis in original; Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia’s Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB* (Public Affairs, 2010), p. 4. According to a 2008 sociological study of Russian elites, the *siloviki* were among the most status-quo oriented elite groups: Mikhail Tarusin, *Summa ideologii: Mirovozzreniye i ideologiya sovremennoy rossiyskoy elity* (Institut obshchestvennogo proyektirovaniya, 2008), p. 130. On the heterogeneity of *siloviki* views in surveys, see: Tarusin, *Summa ideologii*; E.D. Ponarin and B.O. Sokolov, “Global’naya politika glazami rossiyskoy elity,” *Rossiya v global’noy politike*, November 11, 2014; William Zimmerman et. al., *Russian Elite – 2020* (Valdai Discussion Club, July 2013).

⁸ Alena V. Ledeneva, *How Russia really works: The informal practices that shaped post-Soviet politics and business* (Cornell University Press, 2006); Alena V. Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise? Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

siloviki clans, with connections that cut across formal boundaries. The battles for influence between these different clans are often intense.⁹

Further, these clan and organizational battles are about not just power but also money. *Siloviki* politics have been punctuated in the Putin era by periodic flare-ups around commercial ventures, and the ability of law enforcement agencies to exploit their authority for their own ends. There have been scandals around furniture smuggling, underground casinos in the Moscow suburbs, and money laundering. In all of these cases representatives of different agencies, such as the FSB, the MVD, the prosecutor's office, and the Investigative Committee, have been at odds over who gets to oversee these lucrative areas of the underground economy. Law enforcement agencies are also frequently found to be complicit in protection rackets or raids conducted to advance private business interests.¹⁰

It is also worth noting that the *siloviki* have weapons other than guns. Under Putin, it has been the power to arrest, and the control over information, that have been the most effective weapons. As Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy put it, "Core individuals collect and amass detailed compromising material (*kompromat* in Russian) that can be used as leverage on every key figure inside and outside government."¹¹ The agencies that have the upper hand in this gathering of *kompromat* are the FSB and the Federal Guards Service, the Russian equivalent of the U.S. Secret Service. This information can be used either for state or private goals, and Putin himself

⁹ Peter Reddaway, "The Silovik War of 2004-2012: What does it Reveal about the Nature and Direction of the Putin Regime?", unpublished paper, October 2012; Tat'yana Stanovaya, "Voyny silovikov v Rossii dlya 'chaynikov'," *Intersection Project*, August 1, 2016.

¹⁰ Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise?*, pp. 179-210; Taylor, *State Building in Putin's Russia*, pp. 156-185; Joshua Yaffa, "The Double Sting," *The New Yorker*, July 27, 2015; German Petelin and Aleksandr Raskin, "Delo 'igornogo' prokurora Aleksandra Ignatenko zakroyet sud," *Izvestiya*, July 1, 2014.

¹¹ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013), p. 5.

has proved the master of this process. *Kompromat* helps ensure loyalty in normal times; it might not have that effect in extraordinary times, however, when the rules of the game themselves are up for grabs.

Siloviki are clearly important players in Russian high politics. This is particularly true of *chekists*, especially those with career connections to Putin. Claims that Russia under Putin is a “militocracy” carry an important element of truth, although the number of *siloviki* in top political positions has sometimes been exaggerated.¹² At the same time, two very important qualifications should be stressed. First, there is no evidence that Putin was elevated by the FSB, or that he was the leading wedge of a long-standing KGB plan to take over the post-Soviet Russian state. Putin’s meteoric rise to the top was sponsored by Yeltsin and other civilians at the pinnacle of Russian power. However, once he occupied the top job, Putin selected people for top positions that he trusted from his past work in the KGB and in St. Petersburg – not only in the state but also in business. As Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan put it, Putin “invited the security services to take their place at the head table of power and prestige in Russia.” Moreover, it was not just former KGB colleagues who got a boost under Putin; he also has relied heavily on previous colleagues and friends from other parts of his life, including economists, lawyers, and businessmen he worked with in St. Petersburg in the early 1990s.¹³

The second key qualification, as discussed, is that the *siloviki*, both in terms of formal organizations and in terms of informal clans, are not members of a single, unified team. As

¹² David W. Rivera and Sharon Werning Rivera, “Is Russia a militocracy? Conceptual issues and extant findings regarding elite militarization,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2014), pp. 27-50.

¹³ Soldatov and Borogan, *The New Nobility*, p. 241. A KGB conspiracy is hinted at in: Karen Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (Simon & Schuster, 2014), pp. 13-35. A critique of this type of argument can be found in: Bettina Renz, “The Russian power ministries and security services,” in Graeme Gill and James Young, eds., *Routledge handbook of Russian politics and society* (Routledge, 2013), pp. 209-219. Also see Dawisha for information on Putin’s other circles, such as the Ozero Cooperative, a group of St. Petersburg businessmen particularly close to Putin (they bought lake houses together in 1996).

Thomas Gomart writes, “The *siloviki* are not a structured group. The *siloviki* are marked by intense rivalries and a high degree of heterogeneity.”¹⁴ Even within the different power ministries there are intense battles for power, influence, and money. These differences make it harder for there to be a coherent *siloviki* response to a political crisis. Individual *siloviki* may play a role in affecting major political change, but not “the *siloviki*” as a coherent group.

ARE CLUBS TRUMP?

The seventeenth century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes theorized about the need for a powerful state, a Leviathan, to maintain social order and prevent “the war of all against all.” Ultimately the Leviathan rests on coercive force because, as Hobbes wrote elsewhere, “in matter of Government, when nothing else is turn'd up, Clubs are Trump.”¹⁵ Indeed, clubs are often trump in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states, which may lack stable and legitimate political institutions for resolving conflicts without force. The Arab Spring dramatically brought home this point, when seemingly stable and resilient authoritarian regimes collapsed entirely or descended into civil war. From Tunisia to Libya to Egypt to Syria, men with guns have determined the fate of regimes. Similarly, the conduct of the power ministries was critical to determining the outcome of a series of “colored revolutions” in the post-Soviet states of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and arguably in preventing such revolutions in countries like Armenia and Uzbekistan.

¹⁴ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), p. 89.

¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *A Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 140.

These dramatic events have led to renewed efforts to explain the domestic political behavior of military and security bodies in the face of crisis and potential change. It seems clear that raw indicators of state coercive capacity – the size and budget of the forces, the quality of their training and equipment, and so on – cannot by themselves explain military and police behavior, although extremely weak states unable to properly maintain or pay people in uniform are obviously vulnerable. Rather, issues of cohesion and will are central to explaining whether coercive organs will support the existing regime, throw in their lot with the opposition, seek power for themselves, or splinter into competing groups. Cohesion and will, in turn, hinge on such factors as whether the military and security chiefs have tight links with the political leadership, and whether their own fate, and that of their organizations, are dependent on these ties. Thus, for example, during the Arab Spring, militaries with strong communal (ethnic, tribal, or sectarian) and personalistic connections to ruling autocrats were more likely to shoot at protestors than those who had a more separate sense of institutional identity that made them less dependent on the existing regime. Similarly, coercive organs with strong ideological ties to civilian rulers, often forged in revolution or violent conflict, are more likely to remain loyal.¹⁶

Of course, force-wielding organizations are not acting in a vacuum, but responding to what other actors do. For example, police and security bodies may have no problem with harassing oppositionists and dispersing small groups of demonstrators (what Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way call “low-intensity coercion”), but balk at being asked to shoot on large crowds

¹⁶ Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring,” *Comparative Politics*, 44, 2 (2012), pp. 127-149; Michael Makara, “Coups-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring,” *Democracy and Security*, 9, 4 (2013), pp. 334-349; Steven R. Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Beyond patronage: Violent struggle, ruling party cohesion, and authoritarian durability,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 10, 4 (2012), pp. 869-889; David Pion-Berlin, Diego Esparza, and Kevin Grisham, “Staying Quartered: Civilian Uprisings and Military Disobedience in the Twenty-First Century,” *Comparative Political Studies*, 47, 2 (February 2014), pp. 230-259.

(“high-intensity coercion”). Only those coercive bodies that meet the criteria just mentioned – such as strong communal or ideological bonds with authoritarian rulers – are likely to employ high-intensity coercion.¹⁷

Further, state coercive organs are not just objects of political activity, dependent on the actions of civilian rulers and opposition elites, parties, and movements – they can be subjects as well. This is particularly true of the military. As Samuel Finer observed, arguably it makes more sense to ask why the military does *not* get involved in politics than to ask why it does, given that it is a highly-disciplined and hierarchical organization, with strong symbolic status as the defender of the nation, and, particularly important, it has lots of guns. At the same time, Finer noted, the military often lacks legitimacy to rule the state, and may lack the capacity to do so once the polity and economy are sufficiently developed. In general, opportunities for coups are higher in poor countries with weak states and fragile economies, and military officers may be motivated to act by threats to the army’s organizational interests, or out of a desire to advance the interests of particular societal groups, such as that of co-ethnics. Countries also can develop a tradition of military coups, in which military and even civilian elites can come to see army participation in high politics as normal – Thailand would be an example. Conversely, other militaries may develop an apolitical (sometimes called “professional”) identity that holds the view that their job is external defense and domestic military intervention is wrong. In contrast to the military, it is very rare for the police and secret police to be able to seize power on their own. Even in cases where the secret services played a central political role, such as in certain Middle

¹⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 56-61.

Eastern so-called Mukhabarat (intelligence) states, they have never ruled the state in their own name, preferring to work behind the scenes.¹⁸

Whether clubs are trump, therefore, depends a great deal on the nature of the club. Some state coercive organs have the will and cohesiveness to intervene decisively in domestic politics, either to protect the existing regime or make a bid for power on their own. Other armed state bodies are more passive in periods of domestic political turmoil, seeking to shield the organization from the unpredictable consequences of taking on an internal role. The nightmare scenario that generals seek to avoid, but that sometimes arises regardless, is when internal divisions within the power ministries lead to outright confrontation or even civil war.

SILOVIKI ON THE SIDE

How likely is a Russian man on horseback as a source of fundamental political change? Not very likely. Serving Russian military, police, and secret police officers almost certainly will not try to seek power on behalf of their organization. The last unsuccessful coup attempt in Russia was in August 1991, a desperate effort by hardliners from the KGB, the military, the police, and the Communist Party to prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union. Before that the most recent, also unsuccessful, bid for power by a Russian general was during the 1917 Revolution and subsequent civil war. These two great cataclysms of 20th century Russian history are united by one central feature – they were periods of state collapse. During state breakdown, it is difficult for state coercive bodies, and especially the military, to stay out of politics. Absent another episode of state collapse, which seems unlikely in contemporary Russia, a coup effort by

¹⁸ S.E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*, 2nd ed. (Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 4-11; Mehran Kamrava, "Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly*, 115, 1 (2000), pp. 67-92.

a military or security grouping is highly unlikely.¹⁹ Russia is a relatively wealthy country with no tradition of military rule, and no successful military coup in over 200 years –a poor candidate indeed for military dictatorship.²⁰

What about power ministry behavior in the event of a major opposition challenge to the ruling regime, along the lines of a colored revolution? Let's assume at the time of the challenge that it is either Putin or someone from his inner circle that he anointed as his successor in charge. Many would suppose that the power ministries would be firmly behind Putin or someone from his team, given that *siloviki* are seen as the dominant faction in the regime. For example, in 2007 Mark Beissinger argued that "the close association of the secret police (FSB) with the Putin Regime... renders it less likely that the secret police would defect, since the secret police have a direct stake in the preservation of their pervasive influence over government."²¹

Given what we learned above about the nature of the different organizations that make up the Russian power ministries, and the attributes of coercive organs that remain loyal to authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, however, there are reasons to doubt the cohesion and will of Russia's major power ministries to defend the regime during a crisis. Specifically, the three major power ministries – the Ministry of Defense, the FSB, and the MVD – all have strong and independent institutional identities and do not have robust ideological or communal commitments to Putin and his circle, particularly ones forged in violence during war or

¹⁹ Given the greater ethnic homogeneity of contemporary Russia compared to Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, as well as differences in institutional design between Soviet and post-Soviet Russian federalism, Russia is unlikely to go the way of the Soviet Union. See: Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002); Henry Hale, "The Makeup and Breakup of Ethnofederal States: Why Russia Survives Where the USSR Fell," *Perspectives on Politics*, 3, 1 (March 2005), 55-70.

²⁰ Brian D. Taylor, *Politics and The Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²¹ Mark R. Beissinger, "Structure and example in modular political phenomena: The diffusion of bulldozer/rose/orange/tulip revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics*, 5, 2 (2007), p. 271.

revolution. Obviously the FSB is the closest of the three to Putin, and its current leader is a member of Putin's St. Petersburg *chekist* group, but the FSB does not command large numbers of troops. The military obviously controls massive coercive power, but it has traditionally resisted internal repression missions, particularly in the context of leadership struggles, and does not possess the attributes of a military inclined to embrace high-intensity coercion.

The lead force in dealing with domestic protests in post-Soviet Russia has been the MVD, with a combination of ordinary police, riot police, and, if necessary, the heavily-armed Internal Troops. It was the MVD, for example, that played the central role in policing the 2011-2012 protests in Moscow, the largest mass demonstrations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, in 2016, as noted above, Putin created a National Guard subordinate to the president that includes the Internal Troops and the riot police, and placed a key ally in charge. This move was widely interpreted as an effort by Putin to create a praetorian guard that would be a reliable instrument of domestic repression in the face of potential internal unrest.²²

The creation of a National Guard suggests two interesting things about the role of the *siloviki* in confronting major political change. First, it implies that Putin and his team are worried about domestic stability. The current head of the MVD, Vladimir Kolokoltsev, is a career professional cop and is not known as a close Putin associate. The current Minister of Defense, Sergey Shoygu, is closer to Putin, but he also has independent political standing and popularity; his fate is not linked to Putin's. Plausibly, Putin believes that neither the MVD nor the military would be a reliable instrument of repression in a crisis. A new National Guard, shaped by his ally Zolotov, could be a more reliable weapon.

²² Tom Balmforth, "Putin's New Security Force Seen As 'Praetorian Guard'," *RFE/RL*, April 06, 2016.

Second, the National Guard reconfigures the balance among the different power ministries. Not only did it undermine the MVD by removing more than 200,000 personnel from its ranks, it also creates a new and potentially powerful competitor to the FSB. Putin's stated rationale for creating the National Guard was to fight terrorism and organized crime, but those are also FSB responsibilities. Future turf battles seem inevitable, in terms of access to power, influence, and opportunities for economic enrichment. Indeed, according to one source inside the security services, the creation of the National Guard was not about dealing with possible anti-regime protests, but about redistributing power between the power ministries. "We are not afraid of crowds," this person said, "we are afraid of each other."²³

This source did not say why the power ministries fear each other more than they fear crowds – is it because he thinks power ministry battles are more likely than mass protests, or because he thinks they can deal with crowds easily? If he thinks it will be easy to dispatch large crowds of protestors, however, his confidence could well be misplaced. It is doubtful that the National Guard would be a reliable tool of repression in the face of revolutionary pressure from below. It will have the necessary capacity in terms of personnel and resources, but it may lack the cohesion and will. Although Zolotov's personal fate is directly linked to Putin's, this is unlikely to be true at lower levels in the organization. These personnel do not have strong ideological or kin ties to Putin and his circle, and thus may balk if ordered to deploy high-intensity coercion against large groups of peaceful protestors. Material rewards and patronage can sustain the organization in less extreme circumstances, but could well prove inadequate when the chips are down. Thus, for example, the August 1991 coup failed when second-tier

²³ "Igry professionalov," *Novaya Gazeta*, July 6, 2016.

generals and lower level officers in the army, MVD, and KGB dragged their feet and otherwise resisted orders to use force.

There is one internal coercive force, however, that might be considered reliable in high-intensity coercion scenarios – the *Kadyrovtsy*. These are the forces loyal to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, typically estimated at around 20-30,000 people. Regardless of their formal designation – many of them were technically part of the MVD and should be transferred to the control of the National Guard – it is widely believed that their loyalty is more personal than institutional, directly to Kadyrov himself. In turn, Kadyrov has on multiple occasions pledged his personal loyalty to Putin and suggested that he is willing to defend Putin against his enemies, and Putin has likewise shown great confidence in Kadyrov. The *Kadyrovtsy* do possess many of the qualities outlined above, in particular the close personal and communal ties forged during violent conflict, that suggests they could be a reliable force in a crisis. Central power ministries, in particular the FSB, allegedly resent Kadyrov's influence and unconstrained behavior, but Putin has repeatedly resisted entreaties to remove or discipline Kadyrov. However, any attempt to expand the role of the *Kadyrovtsy* during a crisis beyond Chechnya, particularly in Moscow, would likely face pushback from the FSB, and perhaps the MVD and even the armed forces.²⁴

A major social challenge in the form of mass mobilization would not, of course, inevitably lead to an attempted crackdown. Indeed, the smartest regime strategy is often to do nothing and let the protests fizzle out on their own, and one might expect that the political leadership would be too smart to shoot at unarmed protesters.²⁵ Another possibility is that

²⁴ Andrew Bowen, "Kadyrovtsy: 'Vladimir Putin's Combat Infantry' and Ramzan Kadyrov's Henchmen," *The Interpreter*, June 10, 2015.

²⁵ On how repression can often backfire, see, for example: Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

popular challenges lead to splits inside the regime, and this is the environment in which *siloviki* insiders arguably could play the greatest role in bringing about political change. For example, one could imagine a situation in which an unpopular president, whether Putin some years in the future or someone else, faces both popular mobilization and elite defections. Under these circumstances the leaders of the power ministries would likely be influential actors, sought out by various elites seeking to build an alternative coalition. Similarly, *siloviki* members in informal clan networks could use their connections and access to *kompromat* to maneuver on behalf of either the sitting president or an alternative ruler from within the elite. In these types of scenarios, however, we are talking about a change in leadership, and not necessarily fundamental change in the nature of the regime.

Soviet and Russian history suggests that elite conflicts over the top job (albeit normally without mass mobilization) are the periods during which military and security leaders play the largest role. For example, a few months after Stalin's death in 1953 top Soviet military generals arrested secret police chief Lavrenti Beria at the order of Communist Party chief Nikita Khrushchev, removing a major contender for power. In 1957, both the head of the military and the head of the KGB backed Khrushchev when others in the top Party leadership tried to remove him. In 1964, the head of the KGB quietly supported an effort led by other top Party officials, including Leonid Brezhnev, to remove Khrushchev from power. Thus, the military and even more so the KGB were important but secondary players in Communist Party leadership disputes.²⁶

²⁶ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: the man and his era* (WW Norton & Company, 2003), pp. 5-15, 250-255, 310-324, 515.

The most dramatic and violent struggle for power in post-Soviet Russia took place in September-October 1993. Yeltsin dismissed the parliament, which was still operating based on the heavily-amended Soviet Constitution. The parliament responded by impeaching Yeltsin and appointing his vice president as president. This constitutional crisis of “dual power” lasted two weeks, with both sides trying to elicit the support of the various power ministries. The force structures largely remained loyal to Yeltsin, most importantly after an attack by armed parliament supporters on the mayor’s office and the main television tower left dozens dead. At that point Yeltsin was able to call on the army, and especially his own presidential guard, to gain control of Moscow and arrest the opposition leaders. But the military only agreed to act after armed rebels initiated violence, and it took a personal visit by Yeltsin to the Ministry of Defense, and a direct written order taking personal responsibility, for the military to relent.²⁷ The loyalty during the crisis of the Presidential Security Service and its head, Aleksandr Korzhakov, led Yeltsin to give Korzhakov more powers, telling him to turn his service into a “personal mini-KGB.”²⁸ In this case, like most of the Soviet-period cases, the coercive organs of the state acted in response to decisions of the civilian political leadership and worked to preserve the existing political order rather than upset it.

Informal clan politics have been important in the leadership transitions from Yeltsin to Putin (1999-2000), from Putin to Medvedev (2007-2008), and from Medvedev back to Putin (2011-2012). There was considerable behind-the-scenes politicking about all of these events, and in some cases various *siloviki* factions were involved. Putin’s rise to the top under Yeltsin was not a *chekist* or *siloviki* plot -- it was the civilian clan known as the Yeltsin “Family” that

²⁷ Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army*, pp. 283-301.

²⁸ Aleksandr Korzhakov, *Boris Yel'tsin: Ot rassveta do zakata* (Moskva, 1997), p. 404.

played the most important role in advancing Putin’s candidacy. On the other hand, the struggle over who might succeed Putin in 2008, or whether to find a way to have him serve three consecutive terms (perhaps by amending the Constitution), definitely involved key top *siloviki* and competing *siloviki* clans. Similarly, the battle over whether Medvedev might be allowed to go for a second term in 2012 also featured prominent *siloviki*. In both of these cases, however, the key *chekist* was Putin himself – ultimately it was up to him if he stepped aside in 2008, and returned to the Kremlin in 2012. Further, these episodes were all resolved within the existing rules of the game.²⁹

There is one scenario for fundamental political change that would likely involve some *siloviki* in a lead role – a move to make Putin “president for life.” In 2007 Putin rejected the idea of rewriting the Constitution to allow him to serve a third term. The next time term limits would stand in the way of Putin staying on as president will be in 2024, when Putin will be 72 years old. Assuming Putin runs and is reelected in 2018, and faces no other threat to his rule in the meantime, pressure will likely grow from within the system for Putin to concoct a way to stay in power after 2024. Key members of his team will likely, as in 2007, see him as the best possible guarantee of their power and fortunes, and press for a continuation of his rule. This “Putin forever” scenario meets the technical definition of fundamental political change, because the basic rules of the Constitution would be changed or subverted; on the other hand, it would be change for the sake of stasis, so less transformative than the other scenarios considered above. Further, this would be another instance in which Putin himself would be the ultimate decider.

²⁹ Reddaway, “The Silovik War of 2004-2012”; Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising*, updated edition (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2007), 50-60; Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (Simon and Schuster, 2015), pp. 328-333, 381-392.

Overall, *siloviki* – both of the formal organizational kind and the informal clan network kind – have been most influential in helping to decide who rules Russia when they are acting to preserve the existing order and are working in support of top civilian elites. The one time the head of the KGB, together with the head of the army and the police and leading civilian officials, tried to overthrow the leader of the state, in August 1991, it was a miserable failure. More common are circumstances in which behind-the-scenes maneuvering within the elite involves top power ministry officials or informal *siloviki* clans. But these instances tend to reinforce the status quo, not stimulate major political change. Russian *siloviki* in the current era are “the conservative guardian of the existing order,” the role Samuel Huntington ascribed to the military in countries facing the transition to mass politics.³⁰ In Russia, they tend to play this role from the side, not out in front.

One final point also should be noted – as Elvis Costello once sang, “accidents will happen.” Indeed, perhaps the most likely way the *siloviki* will bring about fundamental political change in Russia is by mistake. Although top power ministry officials, and the heads of the different *siloviki* clans, would like to preserve the existing system, some of their actions could well lead to unintended consequences. One obvious way this could happen in a crisis is a bungled use of force against peaceful protestors that generates a more popular backlash. More likely perhaps is a slow-drip hollowing out of the system, as battles over power and wealth between different *siloviki* factions make the economy and polity progressively less effective. This type of institutional decay could tip into institutional breakdown, what Steven Solnick called a “bank run,” in which officials seek to appropriate state assets for themselves before it is

³⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968), p. 221.

too late, thus exacerbating the breakdown that they wish to avoid.³¹ So far Putin's oversight and managerial skills have held the system together, but if he cannot find a way to reinvigorate economic growth in the medium term then the struggle for resources may grow intense, putting the system under strain. Predicting accidents, however, is hard to do. Absent such a scenario of unintended consequences, the *siloviki* will under most circumstances be a force for stability, not fundamental change.

THE END OF THE "NEO-KGB STATE?"

Fundamental future political change implies the unraveling of the Putinist system and its (partial) militocracy. This seems a tall order indeed, since the *siloviki* control the guns, the information, and key levers of economic and legal control. The *siloviki*, and especially the *chekists*, are indeed intertwined in the status quo. They will certainly work to maintain it. But one should not overestimate the coherence and unity of the *siloviki* or the *chekists*, nor the state that allegedly serves their interests. They are divided bureaucratically, politically, and economically. Moreover, they lack the cohesion and will that sustains authoritarian police states in a crisis. Benjamin Franklin, at the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, remarked, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." This is not the ethos of contemporary Russian *siloviki*. They are not revolutionaries, and they will save their own necks separately rather than die on the barricades together.

³¹ Steven L. Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Harvard University Press, 1998).